

Experimental Film: Concepts for Analysis

The films we'll be looking at vary significantly from the usual dramatic narrative and documentary modes. Here are some concepts that can help you experience and analyze them.

Theme, rather than story, is often the uniting structural factor. "Theme" can be a recurring visual motif or can reside in the conceptual content of related images. MOTHLIGHT has a beginning, middle, and end, but no narrative. WAVELENGTH has a few human incidents, but that story is not very significant for the whole work.

When there is a story, it is often told with an interior or psychological logic rather than a "realistic" plot (MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON, The seashell and the clergyman, ANDALUSIAN DOG).

The link between images is usually associational rather than descriptive or discursive. (REPORT, WINDOW WATER BABY MOVING) The logic of image relationships is based on content rather than chronology--that is, the logic of dream and poetry. (BRIDGES GO ROUND)

Little attempt is made to preserve the illusion of real time or real space. The expressive rearrangement of actual space and time is the norm. (ANALOGIES) Or, real time and space can be used to break from the conventions of Hollywood or "realist" presentation. (JEANNE DIELMAN) Often the experimental film generates a new time-space context of its own.

Frequently, technical or abstract elements of the medium such as camera movement, zooming, focus, cutting rhythm, direction of object movement, rate of object movement, color, shape, texture, superimposition are exploited as primary compositional elements, with the image content, or "meaning," being of secondary importance. This is the reverse of narrative film practice. (WAVELENGTH, FUJI)

The relation between sound and image tends to be based more often on analogy or contrast or contradiction than on reality. (SCORPIO RISING)

The statement made or the vision presented is most often the personal one of an individual artist working directly in the medium, rather than supervising a group of hired technicians. Often the "voice" used is the personal one we find in lyric poetry: we sense the maker is speaking directly to us rather than through a "third person" or dramatic narration (WINDOW WATER BABY MOVING, FUSES, PULL MY DAISY)

Appreciation and understanding of the experimental film requires a different method of "reading." A mind set in the viewer akin to the one adopted in reading poetry or listening to music is usually most appropriate.

Often the maker seeks to change viewer consciousness or to operate on a different level of conscious/unconscious activity than is normal. Everyone has access to a range of different states of consciousness, experimental film often seeks access to one or several of those states.

While many experimental works clearly avoid the goal of "entertainment" this does not mean that they do not give pleasure. Often the pleasure is defined in a different way, however. Sometimes unpleasure is used as a deliberate element to affect the viewer (the sound track in WAVELENGTH).

The film artist is often trying to change viewer consciousness by breaking both formal expectations and content expectations. Taboo breaking content is frequently used to shock or surprise or provoke laughter. This can lead to new thought and new (aesthetic) experience. (This is one of the main arguments in Amos Vogel's book.)

Often the social environment depicted is one deliberately set to run against the expectations of "normal" middle class manners and values. (SCORPIO RISING, FUSES, PULL MY DAISY)

Sometimes the films are deliberately puzzling: sometimes there is a solution to the puzzle, but often there is not. On first viewing, it can be a mistake to try to "put it all together" right away because the duration of puzzlement may be something being used in a creative way. Similarly, trying to find exact meanings for symbols (as in Maya Deren's work) may limit your appreciation. The power of such symbols is often that they mean several things, or mean different things at different moments in the work.

With the above in mind, it will often be useful to ask yourself questions such as:

What is the main feeling or image that the film leaves in your mind? What is the overall mood of the film? How is that achieved? What meanings does it suggest?

What are the key images or symbols recurring in the film? Do they have a common element? Is there a thread connecting the associations set up in your mind?

On the technical/abstract level, what are the main recurrent motifs? How are they organized?

What's done with time? Is there an impression of chronological development? Is time broken up and rearranged? What effect does the use of time have on the overall image presented by the film?

What's done with space? Is space coherent in the film? Is it rearranged? What effect does the use of space have on the overall effect of the film?

What is done with the sound track (if there is one)? How are voice, sound, and music used in relation to each other and in relation to the image track?

What motivates or directs the changes from shot to shot, sequence to sequence? What patterns emerge in viewing?

Does the film have a structure? What defines this?

How does the film develop over time?

How does the film "educate" you to understand its aesthetics?

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